

# Guest column: Instant Runoff Voting could simplify things

**Proposal has potential to improve the elections in Memphis. It should at least be an option for the city government to consider in future elections.**

By Steve Mulroy and Shea Flinn  
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If you could cut election cost, boost voter turnout and allow the will of the people to have a greater impact, would you?

John McCain would; so would Barack Obama. The Maine Democratic Party and the Utah GOP have signed on. Will you?

If the answer is yes, then you need to let the Memphis Charter Commission ([Myron.lowery@memphistn.gov](mailto:Myron.lowery@memphistn.gov)) know you want Instant Runoff Voting in our city elections.

This week, the Memphis City Charter Commission will decide whether to give Memphis voters the chance to consider it for city elections.

Under IRV, you rank your candidates in order of preference -- first, second, third, etc. If one candidate gets a majority of first-place votes, he or she wins. If not, the candidate with the fewest first-place votes is eliminated, and his or her ballots get redistributed among the remaining candidates based on the second-place votes. This process continues until a candidate gets a majority and is declared the winner.

IRV is used in Minneapolis; San Francisco; Oakland, Calif.; Sarasota, Fla.; and many other cities. Nearby, North Carolina cities Cary and Hendersonville have adopted it, and it's used for overseas and military voters by Arkansas, North Carolina, South Carolina and Louisiana. It's used on the international level in Ireland, India and Australia, and is a growing trend: Since 2000, it has been approved decisively in 11 of 12 voter referendums.

We've all seen the "spoiler" problem in elections with more than two candidates. Too many similar candidates split their supporters' votes and, therefore, candidates win with far less than a majority. Other, lesser-funded candidates are never heard from.

IRV solves these problems. Voters can simply vote their consciences: "1" for Nader, "2" for Perot, "3" for Gore, etc. Lesser-known candidates get their chance, and the majority's

preference is respected. Not everyone will get their first choice, but almost no one will get their last choice.

Currently, we solve this problem by having runoff elections in some City Council races (except for when we don't). But these second elections are costly to run, and in Memphis we often have less than 10 percent turnout. IRV gives you the benefit of a runoff vote in one regular-turnout election, saving \$250,000 in election costs each time it's used.

In fact, because it gives lesser-known candidates a chance, it tends to actually increase voter turnout by making elections more competitive. It also provides more opportunities for minority and female candidates.

IRV also discourages negative campaigning. Since candidates want to be the first choice of their natural base and the second choice of their rivals' bases, they can't afford to offend voters with polarizing rhetoric.

For all these reasons, the Charter Commission should put a referendum on the ballot giving Memphis the option of choosing IRV for city elections. We still have some technical issues about how to conduct IRV with our current voting machines. But those are likely to resolve soon, as Nashville gets ready to pass a law requiring us to switch to a new voting machine system very compatible with IRV. Either way, the city should have the option of approving IRV once that's worked out.

For City Council districts currently using costly runoff elections, IRV is a no-brainer. And why shouldn't we get the advantages of the "instant" runoff in the other City Council districts, too?

In cities and countries where IRV has been used, voters have reported it easy to use and have expressed high satisfaction with the process. Critics have said it is too confusing, when in fact it is literally as easy as 1-2-3.

IRV has the potential to dramatically improve the quality of elections in Memphis. It should at least be an option for the city government to consider in future elections. Don't the voters deserve the chance to vote on it?

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